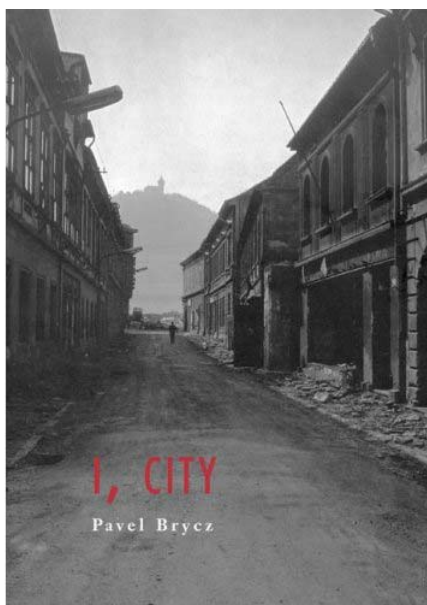


## IF THE TIME IS RIPE: ILLUSION AND ASSOCIATION



A street in old *Most* from *Most 1932 – 1982* (*Most: Městský národní výbor*, 1982) and as cover picture for *I, City* by Pavel Brycz, translated from the Czech by Joshua Cohen & Marketa Hofmeisterova, Prague: Twisted Spoon Press.

*I, City* is a novel about the northern Czech city of Most (means *bridge*), an ancient city founded on a primeval wetland that was literally "relocated" to get to the brown coal beneath it.

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‘Illusion’ is an ambiguous concept; the word can be used for quite different ideas. Essentially an illusion is a state of mind in which subjective aspects of perception take precedence over, or stand alongside, objective ones. However, it comes close to the meaning of ‘delusion’ when the belief in the subjective aspect overrides the objective and then appears to be written in stone. In this latter sense an illusion is an assumed reality, or a patent misconception. But an illusion is also an imaginative creation, an inventive or intuited aspect of an unrealised sense of self or one’s relationship to reality – an idiosyncratic slant on experience and a creative feature of thought may be rightly thought to reside in the realm of illusion, while there is something of both senses in the phrase ‘grand illusions’.

Whereas a delusion is an idea substituted for something that is too difficult or too painful to bring to consciousness, illusion has a vital role in creative living. Donald Winnicott, the famous psychoanalyst, assumed that the task of the acceptance of reality was never complete, that no human being is free from the ‘strain’ of relating inner and outer reality, and that relief from the strain is provided by inhabiting an ‘intermediate area of experience’ which is not challenged and which is in direct continuity with the child ‘lost’ in play. The child grows by a process of disillusionment, but first he has to have the illusion that he creates his own reality. This transitional ‘area’ is ‘the realm of illusion which is at the basis of initiation of experience’ (*vid.* Winnicott, 1971, pp. 13 –14).

On the contrary, the expression ‘as if’ often betrays one’s illusion of being in touch as an experiencing self. For instance, ‘I really felt I was having a good time’ carries a

suggestion of being outside of that experience, and that the speaker has only the illusion of being present. I speak 'as if' I am present; while present ostensibly I am still left with the sense of being absent. The expression 'as if' is extremely common and usually passes unnoticed. It may be that to become present I require to be disabused of an illusion of perfection that sets me apart from everyday reality. The ubiquitous expression 'to be honest' seems to me to be an illusory attempt to escape from 'as if' existing. It appears to function as a pretence of disillusionment, a plausible statement of being-in-communication. It is like that other specious expression 'let's face it'. It seems to say 'we can't really stand the truth, can we – it is necessary to lie'. I suggest this is one sign of being trapped in illusion.

An enigmatic form of illusion is the dream; the dream reality, combining and condensing experience, wish, fear, aspiration and disappointment provides a tantalising glimpse of inner reality.

Association enables understanding of how the dream illusion functions to progress that inner reality. As such, a dream may be thought to prompt the distinction between what is illusion in the sense of avoidance of reality and reality itself in the sense of a self coming to be. For this to occur a dream has to be associated with.

Psychoanalytic work proceeds by way of free associations, mainly those of the *dreamer-of-himself*, and the emerging relevance of such associations to specifics of the therapeutic relationship and what the parties to that relationship are doing with one another. And so unconscious motives, and defences against these motives, can begin to be understood. The two parties may thus arrive at an interpretation that has the effect of illuminating and bringing relief and which may inaugurate a new sense of having choice and initiative. The remainder of this article is a detailed example to illustrate the idea of association. At the same time, it touches upon the complex meaning of illusion.

The particular dream emerges out of oblivion via an indistinct impression of the sorting out of shades of colour to find the dreamer walking in the company of the shadowy figure of a woman on his right hand side. He comes upon a wide-open doorway to his left with a view into a large disused workshop. Another passer-by has stopped ahead of him to stare in at the dingy yet intriguing interior. The roof has gaps in it that would let in the rain. The dreamer ventures inside. Rusty scrap metal is strewn around the place. Rows of dusty workbenches are covered with unfinished jobs. Yet he feels like a trespasser and is afraid that the place may still be operative and that, at any moment, a worker might appear and want to know what he is doing there. He notices evidence that the place may once have been a schoolroom. Crudely executed murals once adorned the walls, now faded and peeling. In an adjoining corridor there are two murals, one indicating where punishments were administered, the other, first aid. The dreamer turns to the shadowy woman at his side and pleads with her to be his wife.

At this point the dreamer awakens and finds that a poem is in process of being written in his head. It unfolds clearly and effortlessly in the transitional zone between sleeping and waking. When the poem is complete the dreamer rises and notes it down. The first couplet is from a Marlowe poem he committed to memory at school:

Come live with me and be my love  
And we will all the pleasures prove...

And then continues:

Or stay the woman on the steps  
When our eyes met as my bus went by  
And only then illusions will not die.

This poem is not a dream, but an instant association that seems to concern the problematic role of illusion in the dreamer's life.

This prompted further associations. The workshop brings to his mind how that day he had seen out of the window of his office demolition men in yellow jackets and hard hats issuing with scrap metal from the building opposite on to a scaffolding and throwing the scrap down into a huge skip. He also remembered that he had received a phone call that morning from his partner asking for his help with some matter. She had sounded panicky to him and he had been irritated by what he experienced as her demanding tone and had responded rudely, allowing her to give up and put down the phone. But he had found it hard to focus on his work for some time afterwards and felt anxious about the retribution he would face back at home.

This reminded him how he had made a detour on the way home to pick up his camera that was being repaired. When he got home he discovered that the old fault was still recurring. This made him frustrated and angry and he realised how hard it was for him to shake off these uncomfortable feelings, *as if* it was in reality impossible to recover from them; all he could manage was to try to forget them, they would never stop tormenting him for good.

When he got home he found his partner was indeed displeased with him, and out of communication, just as he had been with her earlier. This made him anxious and he went into the offensive and lied to justify his attitude on the phone. He also found it very hard to agree that he could simply have said he hadn't been free to speak when she rang. It struck him he had made much more of her request than it warranted. In fact she hadn't needed him to drop everything. He had had a vested interest, he thought, in creating a situation.

The dream and its immediate association (the poem) seemed then to be making use of these subliminal impressions (the demolition men) and misunderstandings (the phone call) to point to something in the life of the dreamer that had become redundant and was fit only for the scrap heap. The poem's allusion to the unalloyed pleasure of lovers in one another was in stark contrast to the ruinous interior (the workshop and the unfinished jobs left to rust like the self-generating conflicts in his spoiled relationships that had persisted since infancy (the old schoolroom). The association with the broken camera which had been 'repaired' but had immediately reverted and developed its old fault was also a warning suggestive of an inability to produce images (to make use of the dream, for instance) and seemed linked to the interrelationship between illusion and reality (thus Winnicott) with the adage: the camera never lies (as he had to his partner to pacify her and avoid responsibility for his hostile attitude). The poem (association) that formed in his waking state makes it

initially clear that his clinging to an idealised and unrealisable illusion could be at the root of his inescapably troubled feelings and his psychic ruination. It opened the way to a string of associations thrown up by the dream and gave possible access to a fuller understanding.

But any interpretation would be premature without associating with the murals in the old schoolhouse. Drawing attention to this reminded the dreamer of two separate incidents from his schooldays. The headmaster had commissioned pupils in the senior art class to design thematic murals for the corridor wall outside each department. Although he had not been, like some of the students, good at drawing, he did discover he possessed an intuitive appreciation of paintings, a gift that had been encouraged by a one-legged art master. He then remembered that this veteran of the war had cautioned him in his old-fashioned way ‘against falling victim to the perils of self-abuse’.

The second association was from his nursery days. His mother had left home, leaving the grandmother to look after him. He did not recall missing his mother, but remembered vividly being sat on the knee of a young teacher and hugged after falling and skinning his knee. What he remembered was how he had cried and laughed at one and the same time. This puzzling conflicted feeling from over forty years previously was still fresh in his mind.

The two murals in the corridor in the dream he associated with the headmaster and the lady superintendent respectively. This gave a slant on to the way he implicated his partner in his self-punishment (behaviour which risked his being sent to the headmaster’s room). Giving that role to his partner gave her the additional role of the one who forgave (spending time lying on the couch in the lady superintendent’s darkened room until the pain in his hands and wrists of the belting subsided). This unconscious manoeuvre allowed him to split off his responsibility for himself into an illusion of perfection (marrying the shadowy woman like an idyllic romance with an attractive woman glimpsed in passing – ‘I did but see her passing by, And yet I love her till I die’ (anonymous old English rhyme: *There is a Ladie Sweet and Kind*). Note the force of the line in Christopher Marlowe’s poem: ‘There will I make thee beds of roses’ (*ibid.*).

The association to the murals brought up unexplored feelings and along with his frustration over the damaged camera seemed a direct reference to his unexercised capacity for listening to himself and entertaining creative illusions. Perhaps the time was ripe to recover that capacity. Greek has a word for this: *chairo* = time in the sense of decisive opportunity. In the text accompanying a recent exhibition of the photographic career of Alexander Rodchenko, who died in 1956, Helen Lockett quotes from a short essay by the great photographer called ‘A Warning’: ‘the subject makes such a strong and unexpected impact by its specifically photographic value, that it not only competes with painting, but can also reveal a completely new way of looking at the world...’ (Lockett, 2008, p. 19). This ‘visual interpretation of reality’ (*ibid.*) is close to the creative meaning of ‘illusion’.

The dreamer’s intuitive faculty associated with his early apperception of the symbolism in a Dufy painting in the one-legged master’s junior art appreciation class, but associated now with employing imagination with regard to his own symbolic

meanings, had lain dormant a long time. Instead, his idealising had prevented a more fruitful relationship developing, ‘a new way of looking’, with his various partners (represented in the dream by the powerful image of the ruinous workshop).

The fear of being discovered by a workman could well be associated with his attitude to his analyst – in as much as the dreamer was there as an onlooker only and regarded the analyst as someone who would force him to give an account of himself or tell him to get out. The figure in the dream, who had stopped up ahead of him to look into the dereliction, is also suggestive of the analyst.

In the context of the analytical sessions, the interpretations gathered together the associative strands provided by the dreamer and furnished the dreamer with a potential key to working with his anxieties in the face of reality and an understanding of the self-stultifying way he defended himself, kept himself under wraps, by keeping alive an illusion of perfection, and refusing to subject himself to a creative disillusionment. Heinz Weiß, a German psychoanalyst describes the case of someone ‘who created a timeless, romantic universe that appeared to serve as a defence against experiences of envy and separation’ (Weiß, 2008, chap. 10). Weiß quotes another analyst (Herbert Rosenfeld, 1971) who wrote convincingly about how ‘by means of narcissistic and perverse mechanisms, the underlying destructivity can become covered up as a longing for harmony, timelessness and endless peace’ (*ibid.*).

The final point is about credence. Credence works in two ways. First, the associations give opportunity to interpret the coded message of the dream and gain insight into how the dreamer is using the therapeutic process, and secondly, how the therapeutic process throws up a dream that offers a presentation of the defences and the anxieties that give rise to the defences, and how these defences hold up psychic growth, affecting the degree to which a life can be lived. It gives ownership, brings about the possibility of reparation, and affords relief and an enhanced capacity for reality.

This is summed up by a lovely remark about Freud as ‘one who, by plunging into the abysses of human ambivalences, both learns and teaches how to love those family outings in the mountains more, in greater freedom... [His] modest reassuring leather bag [on show in the Freud museum in the Berggasse, Vienna] makes me think of all those to whom I myself owe what little self-confidence I possess, the essential minimum of ability needed to live with the dark places of myself’ (Claudio Magris, 1989, p. 204).

Thus, an interpretation can now be essayed with respect to the dream in the light of a) the associations of the dreamer and b) how these are anchored in the heuristic present of the analytical relationship.

Here the dream addresses a disastrous dismissing of anything short of the illusion of perfection. This includes a persistent attack on a treatment that does not promise exactly that (a bed of roses). Rather than entertaining the dream-illusion in favour of the disillusionment of reality, the dreamer is prone to feel criticised by, and rejects, the ‘interference’ of the analyst, seeing his interpretations as presumptuous and insulting. Instead of the ally he seeks, he experiences demands being made of him, as if his nose is being rubbed in unpleasant innuendoes. In between sessions he feels

anxious on account of what has been raised and by being left alone with these repercussions. It reinforces in him his addictive behaviours and moodiness.

Into this inner reality the dream breaks and his associative capacity is kick-started (with the poem). It contrasts and links an (infantile) illusion of harmony, which survives by never being put to the test (the belief being that if that is relinquished all is lost) with an unacceptable and persistently destroyed reality. However, as long as the romantic idyll is clung to, the *illusion* of fruitful modest life that works (the workshop, or Freud the lover of simple days in the countryside with his family) cannot be entertained. The idealisation is acted out in terms of self-imposed punishment (and projected into his partners for not being perfect) and in his constant appeal for first aid (hidden in his moody complaining).

The dream appeals to a readiness in the dreamer to acknowledge the ruinous set-up of his psychological state in middle life and at the same time recognize his aspiration by suggesting an alternative creative illusion as to the value of taking the setbacks and disappointments, not taking them ‘personally’, but, in his stride. It presents the dreamer with his strong resistance in such a way as to suggest to him his nascent capacity to face the anxiety in the company of others. The reminder includes a stark image of how the spoiling has piled up over the years and arouses a dread that things may have gone too far (like the broken camera) to ever be put right. For with the image of demolition and salvage there is both despair and hope, the transitional zone of illusion.

For credence to survive great reserve is called for. Fanciful cleverness and impulsiveness on the part of another only furthers a variety of power games that play on the suggestiveness of the dreamer to abandon his own associations. This may be seen to be an aspect of the collusion that can be played out in therapy, for example, one person the expert, the other without insight; or where a covert hostility in a patient is scarcely detectable but for the analyst’s urge to judge him – retaliate – providing a clue to how exploited that patient may characteristically feel. The collusion turns out to be a repeat performance, a way of unconsciously attracting criticism, a state of affairs safer and more familiar to him than the prospect of change, and even affording him a perverse satisfaction – a ‘repetition compulsion’. Provided they are subjected to intense scrutiny such enactments can yield vital information. The dynamics of the relationship will usually offer direct insight as to the way the upset operates to defend against anxiety and will thus be part of the material that has to be brought to the workbench. The underlying disturbance will inevitably be enacted as the only way it has to communicate itself. The dream can be thought to arise out of these dynamics as the issues emerge and become timely. The dream is unconscious communication as are the enactments within the therapy. It has to be decoded in the light of these enactments. To this end it prompts free associations that lead to a certain coherence as to the current state of the inner reality of the dreamer and how it is played out to his detriment. And vitally, but at the same time, fatefully, it confronts him with choice. To imagine this work is anything but arduous is an illusion in the negative sense of a delusion.

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