

Lucidity and Reading: A German Lucid Dreamer's Report

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In the year 1938 there appeared, in a German academic journal on psychology, an article describing a series of twenty—two lucid dreams experienced by Harold von Moers-Messmer.

In his dream life Moers—Messmer exhibits an unusually observant, objective, experiment—minded personality. Many of his experiences are typical — the incongruous detail that alerts one to the dream state, the brightly colored environment, the prickling sensation (“like dipping one’s arm into a bath of car-bonic acid bubbles” says the doctor), and the ability to fly,

This dreamer reports that he usually checks out the situation by attempting to rise into the air. Once certain that he is in a dream state, he sets about observing his environment and conducting his experiments, which usually involve the functioning of one or more of the five senses.

He seems sometimes to have given himself “cue words’ in the waking state to remind him of what he wants to attempt in his next lucid dream state. Unfortunately he says almost nothing about his technique with the cue words, but merely mentions them in passing:

Dream Sixteen: “In an unknown enclosed space I hover in the air. It is obvious to me at once that I am dreaming. I don’t observe the room, but consider what I ought to do. After a while I recollect the cues that I have had in mind for some weeks. While I am thinking about this, it becomes dark for a time, then brighter again. The first word is breath. I close my nose and lips with the fingers of both hands. But it feels as if I’m still continuing to breathe. I don’t have any need for air and perceive clearly my automatic breathing.”

Moers—Messmer makes many interesting notes on his visual impressions. He seems to have been dependent on glasses in waking life, and takes them along into his dream life, where he often puts them on or takes them off to check what happens visually when he does so.

He generally finds that when he gazes fixedly at a portion of this dream environment, “the visual impression weakens” and because he is afraid that he will wake himself up, he turns his eyes away.

When he fixes his attention on reading matter, however, odd things happen to the text.

In Moers-Messmer's tenth dream this dreamer finds himself in his usual chamber but notices some bright specks which soon vanish. He picks up a newspaper:

"I read without difficulty. Then I try to read individual words backwards. The row of letters seem to extend itself; there are many more than would make up the word in actuality. When I have read several words backwards and forwards, something strange happens. Several of them no longer consist of the letters which make them up, but instead form figures which have a distant resemblance to hieroglyphics. Soon I see only these signs; each has the significance of a word or a syllable; individual letters have disappeared completely. I know what each figure means, my eyes glide along them in the usual left to right direction, and I read whole sentences without any difficulty. Unfortunately I had no time to look at the figures more closely, for it becomes dark around me, and I continued to sleep and forget that I was dreaming."

In waking life Moers-Messmer checks out Egyptian writing. He finds that one of the dream signs is rather like the Egyptian letter "t". However, he is not sure he remembered the shape of the dream sign clearly, and, in any case, it was not an individual letter.

Dream Eleven: "I survey the wares in the shop window and take my glasses off as a joke to see if I can still perceive the larger objects. At first everything runs together, then the things become clearer in outline. This astounds me and I look at the street. There, too, everything is clearly perceptible. An awful suspicion comes over me; I take a run, jump up, hover in the air and know that I am dreaming. As soon as I'm on the surface again I run to the nearest store and tear open the doors. Two people stand behind the counter. I call out, "Quick, something to read." On the counter lie books and newspaper. I pick one up, leaf through it and read. I want to memorize one sentence and I read it through several times. The first half deals with communications such as are made in official service. The second half does not make sense, even though the individual words are intelligible. I check carefully for new word formations but find none. Upon repetition the sentence seems to become longer and longer; the content remains the same; I cannot retain it. It occurs to me that I am rather tired; a strange indifference leads me to do no more. The brilliance becomes paler, and I now have all kinds of fantastic thought formations. I wake and hear three o'clock strike. It is three and half hour, since I fell asleep."

In another attempt he "intended to try reading."

"I look around me for something to read, but can't, at first, find anything. Suddenly I see near me a small table, with many white pages, printed, the size of newspapers. I don't check to see if these are single sheets or bound together, and reach for the nearest. The print is the size of newspaper print. I begin to read. I read one sentence forwards, then the individual words, letter by letter, backwards. The sentence is short and as I read it forwards it seems to have no flaws of form or expression. I don't make a note of its

sounds. When I read backwards, two or three of the letters take on an alteration from behind. An individual letter at first looks ordinary, separate from the others in an ordinary way, then, in the space of about half a second it crumples up in an irregular line, running not quite horizontally. The same thing happens to the next letter — that is, the one actually before it. The lines join as this happens so that finally the whole word form an irregular line. But I can't find a meaning in this formation when it is complete."

What I find puzzling in these reading ex-periences is the extreme elusiveness of the printed work. The dream—mind is apparently willing and able to provide very "real" solid facsimiles of waking life reality that do stand up to investigation. When Moers—Messmer scratches a wallpaper with his fingernails he can "feel the tactile sensation strongly." Why then can't the dream come up with some kind of reading content? This lucid dreamer scans to recollect nothing of what he reads or seems to read except the vague recollection about "official communications."

I was somewhat astonished by his extremely detached attitude about the experiences, since I think most people do not react to lucid dreams this way. If he connected these dreams with his own inner psychic world, there is no indication of it in the article.

The excerpts I have given are only a small portion of the lengthy article, which also covers some lucid dream experiences of other people, and makes an attempt to explain the lucid dream in terms of Wundt's psychology.

My translation of the article from Archiv fur die Gesante psychologie, 1938. 102, 291—318 and of another called "Dreams of Flying and Excursions of the Ego" can be obtained by sending \$3.00 to Dr. Jayne Gackenbach, De-partment of Psychology, University of North-ern Iowa, Cedar Falls, Iowa 50614.

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