

A brief description of *La Clef des Songes*, by A. Grothendieck

The book *La Clef des Songes* consists of:

- A table of contents describing a book in chapters I-XII and 5 chapters of notes 1-57
- A detailed table of contents describing chapters I-VI of the above, with many subsections
- A main 315-page text containing chapters I-VI, grouped into 66 sections
- Chapters VII-XII, of which Chapter VII, called “Les Mutants”, is the subject of hundreds of pages of notes (see below)
- A section of notes 1-57 associated to chapters I-V (pages N1-N176 grouped into 5 chapters)
- A section of notes 58-144 associated to chapter VII (pages N177-N691 grouped into 12 chapters)

Summary.

Chapter I. Tous les rêves sont une création du Rêveur. This chapter expresses the meaning and the importance of dreams and the author’s empirical conviction that dreams are sent by an outside force, called “le Rêveur”, who knows each of us intimately and sends dreams in order for each of us to know himself fully. Although all dreams are message, he signals the existence of particularly powerful ones which should act as a call, and warns against the inertia (fear of change) which prevents the dreamer from the meaning contained in it.

He gives a description of his first encounter with the fact that a dream was carrying an important message; his hours of analysis, his inability to go back to sleep until he had examined it fully. However, he never describes either the dream or its analysis.

The question “where do dreams come from” is essential here. Grothendieck examines notions that our languages contain about “gifts”, or the expressions “ajouter foi” or “Glauben schenken” which indicate that our languages actually contain the idea that things come to us from some outside source. He describes how he himself wondered what part of dreams come from outside (as gifts) and what part from reflexes of our own psyches, impulses etc. He anticipates by telling us that he reached the final conclusion that dreams are *entirely and completely* messages sent to us by the Dreamer to indicate fundamental truths about ourselves (which we may ignore or not as we wish).

Grothendieck’s experience of the procedure of dream analysis is taken as a paradigm of the fundamental rhythm of the creative process and described carefully (section 12). The remainder of this chapter is devoted to a description of the process of dream analysis, based on his own experience, but it is entirely abstract (“we penetrate deeper and deeper into successive layers of our psyche”), with various metaphors of onions, garlic etc. It ends with a portion of a dream analysis of his own from which all dream content is absent.

Chapter II. Dieu est le rêveur. This chapter explains Grothendieck's personal experience of coming to the conclusion that God exists and dreams are sent by him: "Dieu est le Rêveur."

His first experience of God (meditation, then self-discovery via dreams) in 1976 is followed, six years later (1982) by a 'personal encounter' with the 'Rêveur' (in dreams). Grothendieck promises an account of several dreams and their interpretations (which are unfortunately, with the exception of one briefly recounted and analysed dream "Rudi et Rudi" in chapter III, are not given in the present text). He expresses his empirical, primary knowledge of the identification of God with the Dreamer, and asserts that each individual has his own Dreamer, but they are all one and the same of infinite knowledge. However, he says that such a thing cannot be proven (gently mocking those who gave logical proofs of the existence of God) but only known first-hand by revelation and experience. He also briefly describes the prophetic contents of his dreams (a cataclysm for humanity within his lifetime, leading to a spiritual renewal of the remaining portion of humanity) and asserts that the realisation of these events is obviously the only 'proof' which can be offered to the doubting.

Chapter III. Voyage à Memphis (1): l'errance. This chapter speaks at length about Grothendieck's parents and his own life, as a road towards the discovery of his spiritual mission. At first he recounts something about his parents' biography and their families, then about his early childhood, but with less detail than in *Récoltes et Semailles*. He talks about his childhood acquaintance Rudi, the man without vanity, and then about his own early conviction, inherited from his parents, that religion was no more than a meaningless set of ancient but reassuring (for certain people) rites. Then he tells how he first became aware of the existence of God as an obvious fact, at the age of 16, and discovered that his mother had independently reached the same conclusion. However, neither of them made any further effort to "follow the call", Hanka till the end of her life, Grothendieck until he discovered meditation in 1976. Until then, both were what he terms "unfaithful" to the call, to their inner mission, to themselves. Grothendieck underwent a further strong call to find himself in 1957, where he stopped mathematics for some months, and also when his mother died. But again he ignored the call. He describes his father's unfaithfulness to the call of God he received while in solitary confinement as a young man, and his mother's unfaithfulness by her writing an autobiographical volume in which she described her life accurately but with no effort at increasing her self-knowledge. This chapter ends with a description of the voice of God as something extremely quiet, a whisper almost impossible to hear in a world of shouting, declaring and proclaiming.

Chapter IV. Aspects d'une mission (1): un chant de liberté. In this chapter, Grothendieck discusses the meaning of the mission entrusted to each of us, and in particular his own; he rejects the idea of one's mission being that of carrying a grand message to humanity such as many Gurus do, and explains that in fact that each of us is entrusted with the mission of witnessing to his own personal experience of self-knowledge, in the hope of leading, by example, others to the same process (and not to simple quotation of someone else's experience). In his idea of *mission*, he is much inspired by the works of Marcel Légaut. Later in the chapter, he turns to the powerful role of Eros in creativity and

warns against the attempt to sublimate it. Creativity is evoked as a fundamental quality of humanity, which is crushed in almost every individual by the power of fear.

Grothendieck foresees that when all humans have gone through the process of self-discovery, creativity will be released and the obstacles removed. *A vrai dire, d'ici quelques générations déjà, les temps "d'avant" paraîtront à tous d'une démente telle et d'une telle barbarie, que ce sont eux désormais qui paraîtront proprement "impensables" et "impossibles", tant ils dépasseront les capacités de l'imagination même la plus téméraire! Le fameux "âge des cavernes" fera figure de charmante idylle bucolique à côté des aberrations de l'âge programmatique et de l'électron...* He discusses the effect of repression (social, sexual...) on creativity, opposing these two major forces on each individual, and attribute the very creation of Evil (le Mal) to the obligation laid on each being to deny an essential part of itself. The explosion of creativity is identified with the ability to recover one's fundamental solitude, beyond any influence of any Group. *En dépit des apparences, la créativité dans l'être humain est un attribut inséparable de son âme et indestructible comme elle.* Grothendieck does not attribute the failure of creativity only to exterior (social) repression but largely to the acceptance and interiorisation of this repression by each person.

A final remark: "la créativité se distingue d'une simple *production* par le fait qu'en plus de l'"oeuvre extérieure" (la seule dont on tienne compte communément) elle s'accompagne d'une "oeuvre intérieure" qui en constitue l'aspect essentiel. L'acte créateur, ou le processus ou le travail créateur, est celui qui transforme l'être qui l'accomplit" ou en lequel il s'accomplit."

Chapter V. Aspects d'une mission (2): la connaissance spirituelle. In this chapter Grothendieck examines the theme of the triple form (carnal, mental, spiritual) of Creativity introduced at the end of the previous one. He notes that the "great religions" cut the three forms apart by classing them as superior or inferior and encouraging the total suppression of the "inferior" one, whereas so-called "primitive" religions do not. Section 49 contains a very beautiful passage describing the spiritual aspect of doing mathematics, an essentially intellectual activity; the spiritual aspect is not so much related to mathematics itself, but to the relations between the psyche and the mathematics, and the individual apprehension of the beauty of mathematics.

In the following sections Grothendieck gives a (convincing) description of the catastrophic state of humanity and attributes it to the "sheep mentality" of collective humanity. Right on target, except he does not seem to admit of any exceptions; also he enquires into the loss of the sense of beauty in all domains, and its connection with the disaster, but the conclusion is not clear since he perceives that this sense of beauty is not completely lost as he himself and his colleagues and former students possessed it.

Near the end of this chapter (p. 212), we find the following sentence: *Dans ces cinq chapitres déjà en place et mis à part le premier, il n'a pour ainsi dire plus été question de ces fameux "songes" (sauf quand-même un peu encore au chapitre II, "Dieu est le Rêveur"). Et jamais autant que ces derniers jours, je n'ai été sous cette impression étrange et parfois déroutante que le "contrôle" de l'écriture de ce livre m'échappe de quelque mystérieuse façon.... Tant par son contenu que par son esprit, ce livre ne ressemble absolument pas à ce que j'avais en tête en m'y mettant.* This is followed by a particularly intense description of the creative moment, in particular the writing of this book, as an act above all of

“listening”, the active role of the author being much smaller than one might think.

The chapter ends with a very long section in which Grothendieck begins a discussion of themes which became central in his researches of the 1990's: the relations between physical and psychic realities. *Cette impossibilité d'une modélisation "ultime" de la réalité physique ne signifie nullement que la conception de modèles mathématiques qui épousent au plus juste tels secteurs de la réalité physique soit devenue stérile, bien au contraire. Mais plutôt, que pour faire œuvre fertile on ne pourra plus continuer à ignorer l'action bien évidente, dans le monde physique, de causes et de finalités de nature psychique et spirituelle.*

This section (quite humorous or at least ironic in parts) describes the heart of Grothendieck's vision of renewal; recognising the existence of enormous, powerful egotistic forces defending what he calls the Image (or the Idol) of oneself erected by the ego and maintained at the price of an extraordinary amount of fiction, absurdity and gigantic resistance to simple observation. Grothendieck points out that people are generally not even remotely aware of these forces and resistances, much less vigilant about spotting and overcoming them (except for Freud). This, to him, is the key necessity for the development of an authentic spirituality (or ability to hear the voice of God). The ego is described as an inextricable skein of reflexes and greeds; the first step in freeing oneself from its power is the simple realisation that the soul is distinct from the ego. The second step is the realisation of what he calls one's own blinkers, inveterate reactions of the psyche whose purpose is to blind the person to anything contradicting the Image, including and in particular erotic pulsions which (since they are too strong in almost everyone to be sublimated) are pushed aside and ignored.

Chapter VI. Voyage à Memphis (2): Semailles pour une mission. This chapter returns to a description of the main (inner) events of Grothendieck's life. In the first sections he recalls his departure from the IHES and founding *Survivre et Vivre*, in a climate of social effervescence left over from the 1960's (May '68 particularly, in France). He describes the efforts of *Survivre et Vivre*, and the devotion of its members, and their total conviction that the events of May 1968 heralded the beginning of an enormous change for humanity, that their role was to encourage and spread. However, the breath of change (perceived as the breath of God) which blew then has died down. Impossible to know why. For Grothendieck, there is no doubt that the change is imminent in spite of everything, and that it will be cataclysmically violent.

It continues with an explanation of what was missing to make the '68 movement succeed; proponents of the movement tended to take only the first drastic step towards self-exploration (for instance, leaving a bourgeois milieu to become marginal), and then establish their ego in the new situation exactly as in the old. Then Grothendieck talks about a discovery about himself; all of his relations with people, even when they seemed based on warm sympathy, were really only relations based on common tasks. His availability and devotion to communication were actually not harmonious with his own inner need for solitude and silence, and for this reason could only be fruitful within limits. *Solitude bienfaisante, solitude bénie toute saturée de silence, matrice féconde du travail qui devait se faire en moi et qui déjà, depuis des années sûrement, m'appelait...* He then recalls his own catastrophic experiences living in Communes.

From this, Grothendieck passes to his mission of confronting the present crisis of civilisation with the promise of hope, due to the deeply buried creative instincts in each person.