

Chapter 24. *La Clef des Songes*

The meditation *La Clef des Songes* begins with the following words, written on April 30, 1987:

The first dream in my life which I examined and whose message I heard, immediately and profoundly transformed the course of my life. This moment was experienced, truly, as a profound renewal, as a *rebirth*. In hindsight I would now say that it was the moment of meeting again with my “soul”, from which I had lived apart since the days, lost in oblivion, of my earliest childhood. Up until that moment I had been living in ignorance of the fact that I even possessed a “soul”, that inside me there was another self, silent and nearly invisible, yet alive and vigorous - someone quite different to the one inside me who always took center stage, the only one whom I saw and with whom I continued to identify myself for better or worse: “the Boss”, the “me”. The one that I knew only too well, ad nauseam. But this day was a day of reunion with the other, thought to be dead and buried “for a whole lifetime” - along with the child inside me.

When reading these lines, one would like to know why Grothendieck experienced this dream so powerfully and why it changed his entire spiritual life, but in typical Grothendieck fashion he does not say a word about it. The reader is left with a sort of twofold impression. He feels invited to participate in Grothendieck's thoughts - apparently there is something that Grothendieck wants to communicate - but then entry is denied to him.

Before we go into the content and style of *La Clef des Songes*, let us make a few remarks on its genesis and scope. This meditation, that Grothendieck dubbed “The Key of Dreams”, is a typescript of some seven chapters and 345 pages, written in Les Aumettes between April 30, 1987 and September 13, 1987. The full title is *La Clef des Songes - ou Dialogue avec le bon Dieu*. Added to this text are the *Notes pour la Clef des Songes*, which comprises 691 pages written between June 3, 1987 and early April 1988. According to a provisional table of contents, *La Clef des Songes* was to consist of twelve chapters, but only seven are currently extant. Currently no one knows if the other five chapters were never written, or were written and but subsequently destroyed, or whether they still exist somewhere. The manuscript was apparently typed by an experienced typist and Grothendieck then added handwritten corrections.

Originally Grothendieck had thought of publishing the meditation in book form. Several times in the text he refers to it as “this book”. In many places he also speaks directly to the reader, which testifies to the fact that he did not write it primarily for himself but for others.

The extensive *Notes pour la Clef des Songes* refer only to the first seven chapters. This could be considered as an indication that indeed only seven chapters were written. On the other hand, however, there is at least one reference to a page mentioned explicitly from the last five chapters.

The dates also show that the the work progressed with incredible speed. Grothendieck wrote one thousand pages in eleven months. As he says himself, he needed on average

two to three hours per page. He says repeatedly that the writing of *La Clef des Songes* took much effort and labor, far more than *Récoltes et Semailles*.

Grothendieck used the same writing technique as in *Récoltes et Semailles*: in each of the numerous sections of varying length, he treated one subject or theme. In general he left these sections unchanged, but if he thought it was necessary to take up the subject again, in order to modify or complete it, he did this by adding new sections, or else via remarks or footnotes. In this manner a rather confusing text emerged, although it is all in all more structured than *Récoltes et Semailles*.

Having made these preliminary remarks, let us now say something about the content, and where *La Clef des Songes* situates itself in Grothendieck's intellectual world. It has been said earlier that Grothendieck, at least sometimes, considered *La Clef des Songes* as the third part in a trilogy, with *L'Eloge d'Inceste* as the first part and *Récoltes et Semailles* as the second part. In this trilogy Grothendieck wanted to examine the question of creativity in the three levels of human existence: the physical, the intellectual and the spiritual.

Many people who knew Grothendieck relate that he was “always” very interested in his dreams. But they only became a central component of his spirituality after “The Great Turning Point” in 1970, and especially after 1980. From this time onward they became a constantly recurring theme in his correspondence. He writes for example to his German friends:

- since the end of July [1980] I am above all examining my dreams. An overwhelming source of riches is lavished upon me, which until now I foolishly ignored with few exceptions. In each dream there is sense and humor and strength, - and if it appears senseless, absurd and even idiotic that is only because of the tremendous inertia in me, which resists the dream's playfully ingenuous message. But now I want to be a more attentive pupil of the Dreamer. Whether attentive and alert or not - in any case I am now already a pupil, and I am never bored.

He wrote in a very similar manner seven years later to his friends Felix and Matilde Carrasquer (see Chapter 27):

[...] and the work, of interpreting their [the dreams'] meaning is the most delicate and the most difficult, but also the most fascinating, that I have ever undertaken in my life - and also the most fruitful. Above all, it is the intensity of this work which has caused me to neglect my correspondence for months and months.

A few years after he had begun his work on dreams, Grothendieck apparently believed that his meditations on the phenomenon of dreaming were sufficiently mature for him to be able to present them to the interested reader in book form. In the first sections he often addresses the reader directly, for example in the following manner:

This book, which I am beginning to write this very day, addresses itself primarily to the very rare (if there are any others apart from myself) people who dare to explore the depths of certain dreams. To those who dare to believe in their dreams and in the messages which they carry. If you are one of these, then I would wish that this book be an

encouragement to you, in case it is needful, to have faith in your dreams. And also to have faith (as I had faith) in your aptitude to hear their message. [...]

If this book can help you at all, it will not have been written in vain.

The first chapters of the meditation can be understood as the development of a “theory of dreams”. This is evidently not a scientific theory in any manner, but even viewed from an esoteric or spiritual angle, most people would find it impossible to share Grothendieck's way of thinking and ideas. In spite of this, his vision is coherent in its own way. The author considers it to be not so much a description of some kind of “reality” but rather as a sort of strange but fascinating metaphysical poetry.

In regard to this, one should perhaps mention that in all likelihood Grothendieck had worked through books such as Freud's “Interpretation of Dreams” and other relevant works on the subject¹. During the writing of *La Clef des Songes* and *Notes pour la Clef des Songes*, he bombarded his German friends with requests for every kind of relevant book, which they scrupulously attempted to satisfy.

After the introductory paragraphs (quoted above) Grothendieck begins with the statement that self-awareness [*connaissance de soi*] is the most important and decisive element in a spiritual life.

Without self-awareness, there is neither understanding of the other nor of the world of men, nor the work of God in man. Over and over again I have found, in myself or my friends and acquaintances, and even in what we call “spiritual works” (including some of the most famous ones): without self-awareness the image that we create of the world and the other is nothing but the blind and idle workings of our cravings, our hopes, our fears, our frustrations, our voluntary ignorance, and our flights and abdications and our repressed urge to violence [...]

Dreams are thus crucial in achieving the self-awareness to which one aspires: “The story of my maturing toward self-awareness and toward an understanding of the human soul is virtually a parallel of the story of my experience of dreams.”

Grothendieck then goes on to demonstrate that dreams are sent by a power outside of humankind, by the Dreamer [*le Rêveur*]. The title of the first chapter is *Tous les rêves sont une création du Rêveur*². They are thus not the result of psychological processes of any kind, but rather messages from the outside. This view is certainly widespread in primitive cultures and also in different religions, but it could hardly be considered “scientific”².

Some dreams contain particularly important messages. Because of inertia or fear of change, many people are unable to recognize these messages. (Several times

¹ This can be concluded from notes in the margins of Grothendieck's copy of S. Freud, *Die Traumdeutung*, Fischer Studienausgabe, Band II.

² The author cannot resist remarking that it is common knowledge that the Sandman is responsible for sending dreams.

Grothendieck mentions in the text that he came to this essential insight - that dreams are sent from an outside power - for the first time in August 1982, six years after he had recognized the importance of dreams.) Grothendieck understood quite well that his “theory of dreams” placed him in opposition to other views:

If I have learned such things about dreams which one cannot find in books, that is because I have come to them in a spirit of innocence, like a little child. And I have no doubt that if you do the same you will not only learn about yourself, but also about dreams and the Dreamer, things that are not in this book, nor in any other.

Grothendieck then goes on to analyze the nature of the “Dreamer”, and comes to the conclusion that God exists and that he is the Dreamer: the title of the second chapter is “*Dieu est le Rêveur*”. God send dreams to humans so that they may understand themselves and find the way to true life. Presumably Grothendieck saw this as the central message of his text, and he recognized the need to explain these thoughts:

I was about to explain the meaning of the “main idea” [*pensée maîtresse*]: “God is the Dreamer,” to a reader who has not had any direct experience with God, one for whom “God” is perhaps nothing but a word, empty of meaning, or even a “superstition” from a “pre-logical” epoch, which has long since come to an end (thank God!) ever since the triumphant upsurge of rational thought and Science. I have friends of long date who plug their ears with sorrowful faces when they hear words like “God”, “soul”, or even “spirit”. I do not know if they will read my testimony, but I am also writing for them, in the hope, who knows? [...]

In several letters to friends and acquaintances from this time (for instance Carrasquer and K.K.) Grothendieck expressed the view that this discovery - namely that God is the Dreamer - was the most important discovery of his life. One need but take a brief glance at his mathematical work to declare this statement incomprehensible, and indeed, completely absurd. One can only note that Grothendieck's judgment of his own work and also his “worldview” had shifted radically with regard to any rational assessment.

In *La Clef des Songes* Grothendieck then goes on to deal with the question as to how he himself found his way to God and to faith in God. For biographical purposes, this chapter, entitled, “*Le Voyage à Memphis (1): L’Errance*”³ is the most important one. There is no other text where Grothendieck expresses himself in such detail about his own life and that of his parents⁴. He describes his parents as convinced nonbelievers and atheists, and speaks of his childhood in an areligious environment. In doing so he doubtless wanted to make clear that, considering his past, it was far from obvious that he would find the “way to God”, that this in fact required an impetus from the outside, namely from God himself.

³ The text contains three more chapters under the heading “*Voyage à Memphis*”. These words, barely decryptable for the reader, are typical of Grothendieck. What does he mean by “*Memphis*”? A trip to an unknown land, an unknown past?

⁴ Thus in the first volume of this biography there are extensive quotes from this chapter.

As illuminating as these excerpts are for Grothendieck's biography, one must immediately add that they were written from a very limited point of view: he wished only to record an account of his relationship with God. After having explained the significance of dreams for his spiritual life, recognized the role of the “Dreamer” and identified him as God in the first chapters, this seems to be the logical continuation, which naturally leads to the description concentrating on only a few events and personalities. Grothendieck expressly emphasizes that it was never his intention to write an autobiography, either in *Récoltes et Semailles* or *La Clef des Songes*. In one place (*La Clef des Songes*, p. 144) he writes that his testimony is a meditation which takes place “in public”, or at least with the intention to publish. Its goal is to call out to others and encourage them to follow the same spiritual path in order to find their true selves.

Grothendieck is convinced that each person has a “mission” and that the most important part of this mission consists in finding the way to oneself in order to recognize one’s true self. Only in this way can a person's creative forces be set free, forces which are repressed by social pressures in all sorts of ways, but above all by inner inertia, and never come to fruition. He discusses the important role of “Eros” as a vital creative force.

Grothendieck evaluates every person with regard to how far they have come on the path to a true spiritual life. With respect to this he also discusses the spiritual aspects of pursuing mathematics. Although it is a small digression, it is worth noting a remark about mathematics which he made in a footnote to this chapter. In the text he had discussed the existence of a creative intelligence (God) which has created all things, the universe and also the laws which regulate the universe. In the footnote he added:

One must however make an exception here for the laws of mathematics. These laws can be discovered by man, but they are created neither by man nor even by God. The fact that two plus two equals four is not a decree of God, in the sense that He would be free to change this into two plus two equals three or five. I feel the mathematical laws as being part of the nature of God himself - a minuscule part, certainly, in some ways the most superficial, but the only one which is accessible to reason alone. This is why it is possible to be a great mathematician while being in a state of extreme spiritual decay.

Finally Grothendieck speaks of the manifold distortions of humanity, which go hand in hand with a loss of spirituality, and which can be seen for example in the fact that the feeling for “beauty” has been lost to a great extent in all domains. (In this context the herd [*troupeau*] is a frequently repeated word.)

Throughout the text Grothendieck frequently writes about himself. He repeats many times that he lived in a spiritual desert for decades, that in 1970 The Great Turning Point took place, and he expresses the thought that his exclusive occupation with mathematics from 1944 to 1970 became increasingly a way of escaping from his personal and family problems.

It is easier to say what *La Clef des Songes* is not than to say what it is. It is not a scientific work, as it does not state any clearly defined subject of consideration, and gives no scientific methodology. It is not an autobiography, although occasionally

Grothendieck recounts episodes from his life, albeit disconnected ones. It is certainly not some sort of belletristic work: there is no narrative movement, no plot nor any characters to support a plot. Grothendieck does however often make use of poetic language and many things can only be understood poetically - perhaps it would be better to say “grasped intuitively”, as one grasps a poem, not rationally, but with one's feelings. Chapter 3, for instance, concludes with the following sentence: “*Seul Dieu se tait. Et quand Il parle, c'est à voix si basse que personne jamais ne L'entend*” - “God alone is silent. And when He speaks it is with such a low voice that no one ever hears Him.”

In particular, the text is not a systematic analysis of the phenomenon of dreams, because it does not deal with actual dreams. It is not some kind of religious revelation either, although God plays a central role. If one reads for instance the “Book of Revelation”, a striking feature is that almost the whole text consists of pictures, visions, and things that are “seen”. Grothendieck's writings are very different; he writes in a sort of visionary language, but deals with psychological events, situations, changes and developments, something “spiritual” hidden in the soul of man. *La Clef des Songes* is perhaps a sort of testimonial - but what would this testimony be? The best that we can do is to say what Grothendieck himself says: it is the writing down of a long *méditation*, which has no goal and in which the thoughts are generally left to themselves. Perhaps Grothendieck's own word for describing *Récoltes et Semailles* are the most appropriate: a phantasmagoria.

On 20 July 1987, when work on *La Clef des Songes* was well advanced, Grothendieck wrote a long letter to J.P. in which he touched on essential themes from this meditation and also from the *Lettre de la bonne nouvelle* (see Chapter 29), in which it can be seen that already at this time his apocalyptic religious visions were becoming more defined. Among other things he wrote:

I have experienced through direct revelation that God bestows loving care on each and all and that he has plans for the life of the peoples and humanity (even if this remains mysterious and incomprehensible). I have also had four or five prophetic dreams about the imminent end and the complete disintegration of industrial civilization. It will be a storm of violence such as has never been seen (which I expect with certitude), but what is new, and which has entirely altered my view of what is to come and the goals of actions in the present, is: this storm does not signal the end of our species. It will be immediately followed by a renewal and a renaissance of spiritual and religious values, the “second coming of God to Earth”. This will happen soon, because I will still be alive, and I will play a certain role in it. But not right away (if I have understood it correctly), because certain books which I must write, in order to prepare and comment on the coming events, will need time to be written and published. I guess that it will happen in about ten or fifteen years, and I would not be surprised if it was in the year 2000 (because “God loves round numbers”). I also believe that I have understood, and I am convinced of it, that D-day [*J* for *jour*] will not be triggered (directly or indirectly) through humanity's volition (a kind of nuclear holocaust or other similar event), but rather through Godly intervention, because for each one God chooses if he will perish on a particular day (“in his flesh” - because the soul remains invulnerable and immortal) or if he will live, if he is called upon by the power of Godly intervention to take part, as a member of our species, in the Godly creation. “Eternal damnation” is certainly not reserved for the others (as in the biblical texts, written by human hands and therefore fallible, as are all human works, even when inspired by God [...]), a dark invention of the human spirit [...]

Thus you see that I am not wasting my time (but perhaps on the contrary you believe that I am speaking nonsense!) and that there is no lack of bread on the table for my remaining years. [...]

I can say that since last October or November I have been going through a phase of “mystical” experience, in other words a direct personal and even intimate relationship with God.